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WHAT SHALL BE DONE WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN ?

BY DR. HENRY SMITH WILLIAMS.

AS NEARLY as can be ascertained, there are about one hundred thousand children in the United States that are public charges. About one-fourth of these are classed as juvenile delinquents or as defectives, including the blind, deaf and dumb, and feeble minded. The remaining seventy-five thousand are dependent not through any intrinsic defect, but through orphanage or desertion, or because their parents are incapable of caring for them, or have been adjudged unfit to do so. The community has, therefore, assumed guardianship over them, and cares for them in various institutions provided for the purpose. The cost of their maintenance in these institutions is, in round numbers, about ten millions of dollars a year.

These institutions differ widely in character. The most primitive form is the county almshouse. It is also the simplest and most convenient form. Naturally, therefore, it was the method adopted in the beginning almost everywhere. And it is still the official method followed exclusively in many of our States, and to a less extent in all but a few of the remainder. About five thousand of the dependent children are thus disposed of, with celerity and ease, and the least possible immediate inconvenience to the local authorities.

If the intention and desire were to make sure that these dependent children should grow up to be paupers, vagabonds, and criminals, then this throwing them in with the human wreckage of the almshouse would be an ideal method of disposal. But if it be desired to make useful citizens instead of vagabonds, then the almshouse, considered as a home for dependent children, is simply an abomination. As to this, there is the most entire

unanimity of opinion among those who have given the subject attention. It is astonishing, therefore, to observe with what complacency our average legislators have viewed the matter. While so zealously multiplying laws for the punishment of the criminal, they seem blind to the fact that in allowing children to grow up in almshouses they are conniving at the development of the thing they are striving later on to repress.

There are some noteworthy exceptions to this, as will appear presently; but in the main the effort that has rescued a large proportion of dependent children from the almshouses of our country has been an unofficial effort, made not by those whose business it is to protect society, but by benevolent individuals prompted to act solely through philanthropic motives. The sufferings of childhood appeal to everyone, and if the legislators were slow to act when the needs of the children were known, perhaps it was in some measure because private benevolence had acted so promptly as largely to forestall their efforts. Private orphanages, under various names, have sprung up everywhere, and these at present afford shelter to a large majority of all the dependent children under consideration—probably not fewer than sixty thousand in the aggregate.

As a rule, these institutions are supported by private endowments and voluntary contributions, but in two States, New York and California, such institutions receive money toward their maintenance from the public treasury. This very doubtful experiment of giving public support to institutions under private control was inaugurated in New York about twenty years ago. The bill authorizing this was aimed primarily at the removal of children from almshouses. It was urged that the easiest and most effectual way to accomplish this was to pay a per capita allowance to existing private institutions, or such as might be subsequently established, for each dependent child maintained by them. In effect, the State transferred its responsibility as guardian of these dependent children to private corporations, the latter accepting this responsibility for a monetary consideration. Having paid this money, the State practically washed its hands of the whole matter. It reserved no right to determine what children should be considered dependent, or how long the charges it paid for should be retained in the institutions. Each institution was allowed to be its own judge as to these matters,

and to draw on the public treasury for the maintenance of such children as it saw fit to receive and retain.

Whether the results have justified this doubtful experiment is a question the answer to which depends very largely on the point of view. The most patent result has been the development of the largest and most elaborately organized system of children's institutions that has ever existed. About 35,000 dependent children are cared for in the institutions of New York to-day, at an aggregate cost of something like four millions of dollars annually. New York City alone has twenty-five such institutions, caring for 16,000 children, one in 117 of its entire population, or one in thirty-five of its child population. That this inordinate growth of the institution system has been largely due to the method of State aid to private corporations is proven, among other ways, by the fact that the only other State whose child-institution system approaches that of New York, in size, is California, the only one having similar laws governing the matter. New York and California, between them account for almost 60 per cent. of the dependent children that are cared for in institutions other than almshouses in the entire country. New York alone supplies half the number.

It is certainly rather startling to learn that one child in every thirty-five in New York City is being reared at public expense in an institution, and comparison with other large cities suggests that this ratio is disproportionate. Philadelphia has but one such child to 2,000 of the general population; Boston, one to 856; even London, with all that we hear of the poverty and wretchedness of its "submerged tenth," has but one to 206 people, as against New York's one to 117. Such figures, however, are not conclusive as to the merits of the New York system, until one has inquired what the institution training really does for the child, and, on the other hand, what could be done for him by some other method. This question is worthy of very careful consideration, because it bears upon the utility of a large number of institutions in States other than New York and California; of practically the entire number, indeed, in which the 70,000 children under consideration are being trained.

To casual observation a well-regulated institution supplies the child with a neat, orderly home, and gives it a certain amount of schooling, and perhaps the elements of a useful trade. But

closer scrutiny shows that the institution also does something very different for the child. It makes him a part of a great machine whose working is never duplicated in the outside world. He is gradually moulded to fit his niche in this great machine until at last all spontaneity, independence, and individuality are well nigh pressed out of him. In a word, the institution training tends to make its recipient an automaton rather than a flesh and blood mortal. He can recite his school lesson and do his task in the work-shop well enough, but as for having any real dependence in himself or any true grasp of his proper position in the world, he has none.

The radical defect of this whole institution system is that it ignores the fact that the most important knowledge gained by the mind of any child in the world is gained by imbibition rather than by direct schooling. The brain of the child is very much larger proportionately than that of the adult, and its cells seem all to have the import of interrogation points. Constantly the child is imitating those about it, observing every detail of all that transpires, asking multitudinous questions—in a word, imbibing knowledge. At five or six years its mind is a marvelous store-house of facts. Meantime its emotional nature has been largely developed, and it has come to have distinct cognizance of matters ethical ; and all this without the slightest definite effort at education being attempted or thought of by the parent.

All through childhood to adolescence this education by imbibition continues as the most important schooling to which the young mind is subjected. It is inevitable, therefore, that a child whose surroundings are abnormal imbibes ideas that are abnormal, and so it is not to be hoped that a child reared even in the very best institution will become a normal and properly educated person, however thoroughly it may be versed in mere school tasks. How piteously abnormal the institution child does become in point of fact only those who have observed it can adequately realize. You may see little tots of three or four, with the cherubic faces of infancy, sitting in rows on benches like so many dolls, seemingly devoid of sensation. Now and again one falls asleep and tumbles over on to the floor. But it does not set up a shriek like a normal child. Instead, it gravely picks itself up and crawls back to its seat. An electric doll would show as much emotion.

Seemingly, the poor little automaton has come to regard such hard knocks as a part of its regular portion. I have known even much older children to suffer pain from an acute pneumonia for days without so much as making known their condition. The spontaneity that characterizes the normal child's expression of its varying moods has been banished from the mind of the institution waif. Even its receptivity, the most deep-seated of its inherent qualities, has been all but dulled to uselessness.

All this applies to the best regulated of large institutions. Indeed, it might almost be said that the better "regulated" the institution becomes the more widely it differs from a normal environment, and hence the more harmful are its effects upon the minds of its charges. Yet without such systemization the institution could not be conducted at all, which is another way of saying that the defects of the institution system are inherent and ineradicable. By no possibility can a large institution be made to supply the atmosphere in which the mind of a child can be healthfully reared.

This conclusion has been forced upon those who have experimented with the institution method of caring for dependent children the world over. One observer has gone so far as to assert that institution children "grow up into half-idiotic men and women." A superintendent of poor in a great city assures me that he can tell an institution-reared man at sight by his manner and expression. The brand of his abnormal training is on him for all time.

Is it any wonder, then, that the average institution-reared child, turned out at last into a normal environment, finds himself greatly handicapped in the struggle for existence, and stands vastly more than average chances of falling into permanent pauperism or criminality? Yet about 70,000 children in the United States are being reared in this abnormal way, and the taxpayers and benevolent individuals are together paying over \$10,000,000 a year to help on the work. How much it costs them later on to complete the task in the police courts, almshouses, workhouses and prisons, it would be impossible to correctly estimate.

In the light of these facts, the conclusion seems unavoidable that any system that disposes of dependent children by rearing them in large institutions is a radically faulty system. At best

such an institution is only a modified and improved almshouse, retaining the inherent defects of the almshouse. The method is utterly indefensible, provided it can be shown that some alternative method of greater promise is feasible.

Fortunately this question is not at all in doubt. The experience of child-savers in many lands and under all manner of diverse conditions proves that there is one best method of child disposal that, modified in details, is everywhere applicable. This method is the essentially rational one of finding a home for the dependent child in a normal, ordinary family. That this can be done has been demonstrated not only in such countries as Ireland, Scotland, England, Austria, Germany, and Australia, but in the only ones of our own States that are able to point with any justifiable pride to the results of their efforts to grapple with the problem of child dependence.

Merely to find a home for the dependent child in a family, however, is by no means the completion of the work. It is necessary that a system of official inspection should supplement the placing-out system to insure the best results. Without such inspection the system of placing out is open to many objections ; but, with proper inspection, it is incomparably the best practicable solution of the problem of child-saving.

But how shall this rational disposal of child dependents be accomplished ? Different practical answers have been given to this question in different communities. In most of the older countries of Europe, and in the very new civilization of Australia, it has been thought that the duty of caring for the children devolves properly upon the government. In Australia in particular a very elaborate system is in operation, by which the government, directly represented by its officials, finds homes for all dependent children, and officially inspects its charges in these homes, to the end that they shall receive proper treatment in all respects, including compulsory attendance in the public schools. An especially noteworthy feature of the system is that the government pays the board of its charges in the families to which they are consigned, continuing to do so while the child is of school age. The rate paid is \$1.20 per week for healthy children, a larger sum for defectives.

In our country perhaps no single State has grappled with the problem as comprehensively as has been done in Australia, but a

half dozen States have made noteworthy efforts in that direction. Foremost among these is Michigan, which has the distinction of having assumed intelligent charge of its child dependents 25 years ago—long before any sister State gave the matter equally intelligent attention. What has come to be known as the Michigan system of child saving is not unlike the Australian system, which it antedates in point of time. The State assumes full control of dependent children, placing them first in a temporary home called a State school, but presently finding permanent homes for them in families. The final disposal is made so expeditiously that at no time are more than two or three hundred children detained in the single institution that is provided.

The Michigan system has been adopted by Minnesota, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, and Kansas, and with some modifications by Massachusetts. It has proven extremely satisfactory, judged by its results. Since its adoption in Michigan, the population of the State has increased more than sixty per cent., yet child dependence has decreased more than fifty per cent. There is now but one dependent child to ten thousand of the general population in Michigan; whereas in 1874, when the present law became effective, there was one to about two thousand. The total yearly cost of caring for all the dependent children of the State only equals the sum that New York City pays for its similar charges each week.

Minnesota, under the Michigan system, cares for 130 children, at a total annual cost of \$22,000. California, with a population almost the same as Minnesota, cares for 4,000 children, at an annual cost of \$250,000. More striking illustrations than these of the relative merits of direct State care on the one hand, as against State aid to private institutions on the other, could hardly be desired.

A modification of the State system, in which the county assumes official charge of dependent children, but makes provision for them in institutions other than almshouses, has been adopted by Connecticut and Ohio. This method no doubt has certain advantages, but it is cumbersome, and to an unprejudiced observer its results have not as yet been such as will compare favorably with those of the unmodified State care system. Under its operation, Connecticut has one dependent child to 800 of the population, as against Rhode Island's one to 3,000; while Ohio

compares even more unfavorably with the adjoining State of Michigan.

Pennsylvania also adopts a county system, but in this case a splendidly organized private benevolent corporation, the Childrens' Aid Society, has practically assumed charge of the work of child-saving, taking upon itself the work of finding homes for the children, and if necessary paying their board. Usually board is paid only during a transition period. A system of efficient and vigilant inspection completes the work.

This Pennsylvania system is perhaps the most radical that is in operation anywhere, inasmuch as it places its charges in private families from the very first, dispensing altogether with the machinery of institutions. The especially noteworthy feature of the system, however, is the payment of board for the maintenance of children that cannot otherwise be advantageously placed.

Massachusetts has adopted this feature of the Pennsylvania system, in connection with its State schools, and it seems almost certain that other States will be obliged to do likewise before they can hope to make proper provision for a certain residual number of crippled and unhealthy children. As a rule, these most unfortunate dependents have fared badly at the hands of the legislators, even in those States that have taken the longest strides in child-saving work. When laws have been enacted making it illegal to detain children in almshouses, an exception has usually been made of sick and unsound children. Even in New York this was done, though one might have thought such a provision unnecessary there. One might naturally have assumed that the great institutions, putting themselves forward as charities, would have regarded it as a greater measure of benevolence to care for a crippled child, for example, than for a sound one.

But strangely enough such did not prove to be the case. The great public-private institutions refuse admittance to unhealthy or crippled children. These must remain in almshouses or be otherwise provided for. So the city of New York, after paying \$1,600,000 a year to private institutions to have its dependent children cared for, is obliged to maintain a public institution of its own for the care of several hundred peculiarly unfortunate children to whom the private institutions refuse shelter. In some cases the defect that debars a child is merely a crippled hand or foot, or a like infirmity.

No doubt, to the managers of these institutions, their attitude in this matter seems consistent with the spirit of broad charity that is supposed to be the foundation of their work. Personally I cannot reconcile the two. Be that as it may, however, the fact remains that not only in New York, but in almost every other State where child-saving efforts have been officially systematized, a certain class of defective children has been discriminated against. Quite generally provision has been made for the deaf and dumb, the blind, and the feeble-minded. But there is a class of defectives falling under none of these headings, who, being ill or crippled, are usually left to the tender mercies of the almshouse when a law is passed excluding "healthy children from that unwholesome environment." It hardly needs saying that no child-saving movement that overlooks these defectives can claim finality.

Another defect of even our most enlightened child-saving laws has been the naming of too advanced an age as the time for compulsory removal of the child from an almshouse. Wisconsin, for example, names six years as the limit. Massachusetts draws the line ordinarily at four years, but allows children accompanied by their mothers to remain in almshouses till the age of eight. Even the lower limit is much too high, as anyone will agree who understands how early in life the child begins to imbibe ideas that help to determine its future career. If infants are to be received in almshouses at all, the maximum age limit of their retention there should certainly be two years, as at present provided by New York and Connecticut.

Reviewing this entire question of the disposal of dependent children analytically, it appears to me that there are four essential stages of its development in modern times, which may be outlined as follows :

1. A stage in which the State accepted dependent children as its legitimate charges, and contented itself with consigning them to almshouses. This method has now no defenders, yet it is still the official method of a majority of our States.

2. A stage in which private benevolence, recognizing the evils of the almshouse method, takes the matter in hand, and performs for the helpless children more or less efficiently, as a labor of love, the work which should be a duty of the State. In some cases, as in that of the Children's Aid Society of New York,

splendid service is thus performed ; yet a method that permits a State to neglect its duties or transfer its responsibilities to a private corporation must be admitted to be fundamentally defective. Abundant work would remain for private benevolence if the State were to take into its own hands the work that properly belongs to it.

3. A stage in which the State awakens to its responsibilities sufficiently to join hands with the private corporations, to the extent of giving them financial aid or official recognition and support. According to the exact kind of support offered, very different results may accrue from this public-private combination, as witness the experience of New York on the one hand and Pennsylvania on the other. But the method is fundamentally defective, whatever its results in individual cases. If it be the duty of the State to care for its dependent children, then its duty is only half done under a public-private system of child saving. Yet such States as New York, Pennsylvania, and California are still resting at this half-way station.

4. A final stage in which the State arouses to its full responsibilities, and makes official and sufficient provision for its dependent children, shirking no part of its duty. Who but an anarchist doubts that the full and final care of dependent children is a proper function of the State ? Yet less than half a dozen of the States of our country have seemed to recognize their responsibilities in this matter. When will the remainder fall into line ?

Presupposing, then, that the disposal of dependent children is a duty that devolves properly upon the State, it would appear, in the light of what experience has taught as to the best methods of such disposal, that no State can claim to have done its full duty by this class of its charges until it has fulfilled efficiently the following conditions :

1. The assumption of official charge of all dependent children of whatever class.

2. The removal of all such children over two years of age from almshouses.

3. The provision of separate institutions for each of the following classes: (a.) feeble-minded, (b.) epileptic, (c.) deaf and dumb, (d.) blind, (e.) juvenile delinquents.

4. The provision of temporary homes in institutions or in

private families for all other dependent children, and of permanent homes for them exclusively in private families, as expeditiously as may be practicable, and where necessary the payment of board for their maintenance during adolescence.

5. The provision of a proper corps of official inspectors to vigilantly guard the interests of the children during their entire period of dependence.

Speaking of the present rather than of the future, it appears tolerably plain that as much as this is the simple duty of every State. Yet no single one of our States can claim to have fully met these conditions, though a few, as we have seen, are gratifyingly near it. Which one of them all, I wonder, will be the first to take the final steps toward doing its full official duty by the most helpless class of its dependents?

HENRY SMITH WILLIAMS.